

## Painterly Proofs: Prints by Hung Liu

September 28—December 7, 2002



figure 1: Hung Liu, *Women Working: Loom*, 1999, color aquatint and soft ground etching, 40 x 50 in., edition of 35, Courtesy of the artist and Paulson Press, Publisher

"I am always a painter in my printmaking."

—Hung Liu

As a professor at Mills College in Oakland, Hung Liu warns her students to avoid "one-liners" in their own work, steering them towards pieces that can provoke multiple meanings and interpretations. Thankfully, she practices what she teaches. Hung Liu's paintings and prints offer a rich and wonderful tension that reflects the artist's continued interest in the aesthetic potential of ambiguity. Powerfully poised between realism and abstraction, surface attraction and underlying meaning, these works mirror Liu's own dual identity as she reconciles her Chinese past with her contemporary American life.

In the history of art, printmaking has often held a similarly ambiguous position. Regarded as "in between" fine art and craft, the nature of printmaking involves a balance between the immediacy and intensity of the artist's touch and the seemingly impersonal processes of mechanical reproduction. In Hung Liu's *oeuvre*, painting and printmaking coexist symbiotically and uniquely in the "rich middle ground" it has been the artist's career-long mission to identify. Liu uses the quotidian analogy of clothing to describe the connection between her paintings and prints. In the same way that we select the appropriate clothing for different activities or events, Liu selects her medium based upon her subject matter, technique, and

desired scale. Thus, recurrent images in her *oeuvre* take on diverse forms and juxtapositions as they appear in different media.

As with the work of other painter-printmakers, many of Liu's prints are inspired by paintings. At first glance, the 1997 etching *Mu Nu/Yellow River* (figure 2) seems to be a close copy of the painting of the same year, *Mother and Daughter*, that inspired it. However, while they each present similar compositional elements, closer inspection reveals unexpected differences between the two works, highlighting the complex relationship between Liu's paintings and prints. The large scale, predominantly horizontal

composition, and muted colors of the *Mother and Daughter* canvas create a calm and placid effect that reflects the repetitive nature of the two figures' work. In contrast, *Mu Nu/Yellow River*, with its more dramatic colors (Bill Berkson refers to the print's "sulfurous tints") and large, loose areas of fuzzy drips around the image, lend a dramatic intensity to the image. Uniquely, the etching conveys the concentrated pace of the two figures, suggesting the harshness of their work as they pull a boat—not visible in the composition—upstream. Liu recalls that (re)interpretations of her canvases such as this were the direct result of interactions with the master printers with whom she has worked, such as those at Paulson Press, who granted her a certain permission to "go wild with the print."

figure 2: Hung Liu, *Mu Nu/Yellow River*, 1997, aquatint and soft ground etching, 35 x 36 in., edition of 35, Courtesy of the artist and Paulson Press, Publisher





figure 3: Hung Liu, *The Bride*, 2001, from the *Unofficial Portraits* series, lithograph with collage, 30 x 30 in., edition of 30, Courtesy of the artist and Shark's Ink

However, Liu reminds us that in her work the dialogue between painting and printmaking “works both ways.” In 2001, Liu created the dramatic lithograph *Unofficial Portraits: The Bride* (figure 3). Later that year, she brought back this same central portrait for use in the painting. Inspired by the events of September 11, Liu substituted the figure’s elaborate headdress with a powerful image of a flying bird that diagonally bisects the composition. Rather than representing an individualized portrait of a bride—as in the print—in this work the bride takes on more universal significance, representing the idea that since the tragic day in September, we have been “forced to wed a new era.”

Although Hung Liu has been a teacher throughout her career as an artist, she admits that, when making prints, she takes on the role of student. While Liu has worked at numerous print studios around the world, she is acutely aware that printmaking is not the medium in which she works on a daily basis. As a result, she comes to each studio with any sense of ego checked at the door, fueled by an infectious enthusiasm for partnership. Liu holds great

respect for all the master printmakers with whom she has worked and views the relationship as an exchange (or, as she says, a yin/yang), in which each party complements the other and each ultimately contributes to the final product.

The collaborative nature of printmaking provides a wonderful metaphor for both

figure 4: Hung Liu, *Trademark*, 1992, lithography and wood, 22 x 34 x 33 in., Courtesy of the artist and Rena Branstetter Gallery, San Francisco, CA



Hung Liu’s life and art. In her life, Liu is a committed and giving teacher, a mother and wife, who is enthusiastically willing to share ideas and engage in intense dialogue about her work. On a parallel, Liu’s paintings and prints can also be read as collaborative endeavors. Through the process of appropriation—from sources as diverse as found historical photographs and traditional Chinese paintings—Liu’s works provide a contemporary matrix for multiple, albeit mediated, voices. These images, interwoven in Liu’s dense works, are unified by her signature drips and washes. For example, the delicate floral and bird imagery, visible in prints such as those in the *Women Working* and *Unofficial Portrait* series, reflects Liu’s admiration for the observational skills and master draftsmanship of traditional Chinese painters. Working on an intimate scale, these painters produced masterful nature studies on rice paper. By including references to these artists in her paintings, Liu reveals she is able to “bring back some of the great Chinese artist’s work, in spirit.” In the process, she enjoys the playful conflation of East and West, ancient and contemporary, small and large scale. While the work remains distinctively her own, it also retains the collective nature of most collaborations: Liu reminds us that the ancient Chinese painters are not only an element of her personal cultural background, but part of a larger aesthetic legacy we all share.

Hung Liu’s own life history informs her work on several levels: stylistic, conceptual,



figure 5: Hung Liu, *Bonsai*, 1992, handcolored photolithograph, 22 1/2 x 30 in., Courtesy of the artist

and thematic. She was born in Changchun, in Northeastern China, in 1948. When she was six months old, her father was imprisoned by the Communists, accused of being an enemy. As a result, her mother was soon forced to divorce him. An only child, Liu spent most of her youth in Beijing. At the onset of the Cultural Revolution, Liu, along with other intellectuals, was sent for "reeducation" to the countryside, where she spent four years living and working with peasants. Towards the end of the Cultural Revolution, when the previously closed schools began to reopen, Liu enrolled in the Revolutionary Entertainment Department of the Beijing Teachers' College. She continued her education in graduate school at the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing, where she studied mural painting. Liu's artistic education in China was decidedly restrictive, as she was trained, and expected to create, in the accepted style of Socialist Realism (a style in which, she recalls, the subjects were "painted to death"). However, this training would prove pivotal in her later career, as one of the reasons she developed her signature wash technique was to "loosen up" that tight realist style. In 1981, Liu applied and was accepted into graduate school at the University of California, San Diego. For almost four years she waited for both permission and a passport from the government in order to leave. Finally in late 1984, Liu was able to leave China and began her studies in San Diego. She has lived in the United States ever since.

Liu had her first experience with printmaking during graduate school in China at the Central Academy. At the time, the

Academy offered very little communication between departments. The Department of Graphic Art, in fact, was isolated in its own separate building. Nonetheless, Liu, "always interested in other people outside my field," got together with some of her friends to silkscreen greeting cards for traditional Chinese festivals. Today, she recalls how magical and thoroughly enjoyable was her first experience with the medium. At the same time, Liu was also experimenting with another form of printing: Chinese signature chops. Working with an older scholar, Liu experienced firsthand the process of relief printing. Using a knife to carve an image into a stone, it was Liu's first opportunity to create a composition backwards and ultimately see it printed in reverse.

During the early 1990s, Liu was given two opportunities to work at the Island Press shop at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. Here, she produced mixed media pieces, such as *Trademark* (figure 4), that reflect her paintings of the period, in which she combined painted canvas with objects. During this visit to Island, Liu also produced many of her early photo-based prints, such as *Houseware* and *Bonsai* (figure 5). Working from historical photographs, Liu combined them in compelling and dynamic juxtapositions. *Bonsai*, for example, depicts a dramatic image of a seated woman exposing her bound feet for the camera.<sup>4</sup> Liu has interpreted this image in several different areas of her work—from paintings to prints—because of its resonance as a poignant symbol of female subjugation. Due to the inherent power of the photograph, she felt the need to represent it in direct way: "the

photographs is so much more powerful than the painted image, the drawn image." Liu then paired this photographic image with another appropriated one, in this case a cartoon-like diagram from a Taoist book demonstrating the use of alchemy to control "chi" or energy. Intrigued by the opposing dialogue between the crippled, oppressed woman and the empowered man trying to retain his life force, Liu realized that the composition reflected a yin and yang.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the artist took a certain satisfaction in the idea of the male figure being reduced to a simple chart.

For her first edition of prints at Tamarind Institute in New Mexico in 1999—the *Wild Flower* series (figure 6)—Liu chose a subject that would allow her to explore gender and identity issues and a medium that would allow her to continue to explore the possibilities of printmaking. Featuring appropriated images of Chinese prostitutes framed within areas of gold leaf, these delicate lithographs also include bright color copies of cards from cigarette packages, as well as painterly overlays of birds and flowers from traditional Chinese ink paintings. Liu's titling of these prints reflects the use of flowers as symbols of feminine beauty, common to many cultures, as well as the traditional Chinese association of wildflowers with "loose" women. Through her clever juxtaposition of images from two unlikely sources, Liu highlights the fact that these

figure 6: Hung Liu, *Wild Flower (Lily)*, 1999, five color lithograph with gold leaf and collage, 25 x 19 in., edition of 20, Courtesy of the artist and Tamarind Institute



women—just like the cigarettes—are commodities being advertised through the language of visual representation. At the same time, Liu views these anonymous prostitutes as metaphors for loss of identity. By representing the images of these women within a new aesthetic context, Liu provides them with a new identity and voice. As she asserts: “They need to be heard, to be seen, to be recognized.”

This concept of reclaiming a new identity for the photographs she appropriates is central to Liu’s work. Liu’s relationship to photography is complex, inextricably bound to her own personal identity and to the more universal process of how we remember history<sup>iii</sup>. Liu recalls that growing up, she always believed in the “truthfulness” of photography. But her experience in China during the Cultural Revolution changed her mind: “I learned that arbitrarily, by retouching, the government could change history. At one moment an important military officer was in a picture. Later, when he became an enemy, he just disappeared from the photograph without any respect for history.”<sup>iv</sup> This was further complicated by the fact that during this period many Chinese actually destroyed their photo albums for fear that they might be used by the government to incriminate them. Furthermore, during her art education in China, Liu and her fellow students were restricted from using photographs, encouraged to paint from only live models. These experiences from her past have blended with her mature musings on the medium to bring her to her current strategy. By appropriating the images and then mediating



figure 7: Hung Liu, *Children at Work: Boy with Bucket*, 2000, six color lithograph with collage, 22 x 30 in., edition of 25, Courtesy of the artist and Tamarind Institute

them—through the process of painting or printmaking or through their juxtaposition with other images—Liu adds a layer of subjectivity to the seemingly objective reality the photographs depict.

At her next visit to Tamarind in 2000, Liu created the complex *Children at Work* series (figure 7). This series of three lithographs<sup>v</sup> depicts early images of children layered over a grid of Chinese text. Rendered by drawing directly on the stone, Liu’s *Children at Work* are not represented as posed visions of perfect cuteness. Instead, through their work, they take on a profound significance. Liu likes the irony of

depicting children—whom we idealize as playful and carefree—at work. For the background, Liu used a children’s calligraphy practice chart—a chilling statement about the education that these children will never be able to attain.

Hung Liu has twice been invited to work at Berkeley’s Paulson Press, one of the most important studios in the country devoted to fine art intaglio prints. Master printers Pam Paulson and Renee Bott were first drawn to Hung Liu at the suggestion of some of the other artists (such as Deborah Oropallo and Christopher Brown) with whom they printed in the mid-to-late 1990s. After a studio visit, they were soon “enraptured”<sup>vi</sup> and promptly invited Liu to print with them at Paulson Press. Liu began her first visit in 1999, her primary interest the possibility of creating a photo-based print. This led to the selection of images of Chinese acrobats that became the basis of the colorful *Permutations* series (figure 8). In a unique combination of screenprint and intaglio, the printers made silkscreens of the acrobat images to create the resist on the etching plate. Soon afterwards—and about midway through her first visit—Liu experienced a significant breakthrough. On their way from the press to lunch one day, Liu picked some passion flowers from a neighboring yard and was inspired to create a soft ground drawing of the flowers for her



figure 8: Hung Liu, *Permutation/Yo-Yo*, 1997, color aquatint and hard ground etching, 26 x 31 in., edition of 20, Courtesy of the artist and Paulson Press, Publisher

*Passion Flower* etching. As Pam Paulson recalls, it was this point that Liu realized she could be “more direct with printmaking.”

At the end of her first visit with Paulson Press, Liu was working on a soft ground drawing of two children that became her *Witnesses* etching (figure 9), when Paulson and Bort brought her a small amount of spit bite<sup>iii</sup>. Pam Paulson remembers that Liu loved this “little taste” of the material, as it provided her with a way to replicate the signature drip technique evident in her paintings. This first “taste” would prove to be a harbinger of an exciting new development for Liu’s etchings that would culminate in the *Women Working* series created during her second Paulson visit. Usually when working with an artist, the master printers at Paulson Press will mix up one jar of spit bite sufficient for the entire process. Pam Paulson remembers that when they would give Liu spit bite, she felt inclined to use the entire jar for each plate. In one of those moments Paulson says she will never forget, Liu started using the spit bite on the *Women Working* plates and started yelping and screaming in her excitement at being able to layer drips all over her images.

Liu’s most recent printed edition, the *Unofficial Portraits*, was produced in 2001 at Shark’s Ink Press in Colorado. She first worked with master printer Bud Shark on a print, *Sisters*, produced as part of a portfolio for the Women of the West Museum in Boulder. Shark remembers how enjoyable the process was, explaining that they had just “touched the surface”<sup>iv</sup> of what was possible. After visiting her studio and seeing more paintings, especially the exquisite *Chinese Profile* series, Shark suggested that Liu return to the studio to create something more painterly and rich. For the *Unofficial*



*Portraits*, Shark encouraged Liu to work in just washes, instead of lithographic crayons, so that she would be handling the printmaking material more like paint. In fact, lithographic crayons were only used in one area of the prints, in the rendering of the insects. This new aesthetic freedom in her printmaking is reflected in the title of these works. Liu explains that in China, the notion of what is “official” permeates all aspects of the culture. Moreover, the notion of the “official,” as conferring legitimacy, is universal: even in this culture we find ourselves bound by it. By naming these portraits “unofficial” at the onset, Liu gave herself permission to break the rules. The resulting prints offer iconic representations of traditional feminine roles: maiden, bride, martyr. However, by rendering these women in heroic proportions and shocking color, Liu grants them very untraditional visual power.

Many of the master printmakers who have worked with Hung Liu marvel at her thorough preparation for their sessions. Armed with stacks of source material such as photographs and other reproductions, she is never at a loss for ideas. In both her paintings and prints, Liu is a thorough researcher (she has been referred to as a “scholar-artist.”<sup>v</sup>) who has scoured through archives, libraries, and bookstores in China in her search for material. As part of the initial discussions about their work, Liu and the master printers often review these materials to chart potential directions for her prints. Despite her meticulous research, Liu is willing to experiment and create chance effects. She acknowledges that her wash technique is an extremely delicate negotiation: pushed too far, it can completely wash out the master plate.

Reflecting this interest in chance, Liu has often worked on more experimental prints in tandem with other processes. She is adamant that she “take advantage of all the printmaking processes” available to her. As a result, she has produced a significant body of exploratory prints. While at Island, she produced the mixed media work *Missing Parts*, a large-scale woodcut with collaged photograph on thick handmade paper. In 1993 and 1994, when she was working at Pyramid Atlantic Press, she created a series of works she calls *Pulp Paintings* (figure 10), produced from pigmented liquid paper pulp squeezed onto a wet paper pulp support and then run through the press.

figure 9: Hung Liu, *Witnesses*, 1997, color spit bite aquatint and soft ground etching, 20 x 17 in., edition of 35, Courtesy of the artist and Paulson Press, Publisher

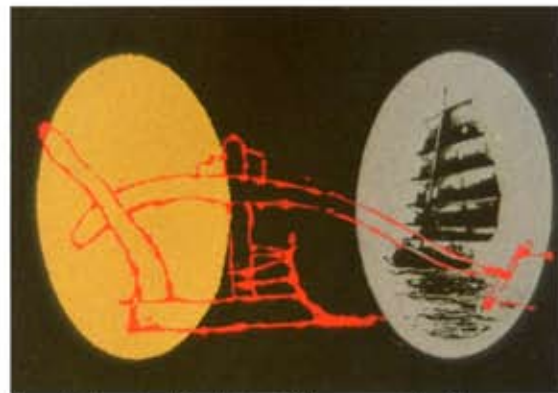


figure 10: Hung Liu, *Pulp Painting*, 1993, cast paper, 20 x 30 in., Courtesy of the artist

The resulting works—featuring dramatic compositions of dual ovals—are rich in color and remarkably calligraphic. Monoprints represent another process Liu has often returned to, primarily because of its technical similarity to painting. Liu has created monoprints at Santa Reparata, Anderson Ranch, and other presses. She appreciates the spontaneity and freedom the medium provides, but acknowledges the significant limitation to the medium: the process produces only one image.

By showcasing the development of Hung Liu’s prints—from the early photo-based processes to the recent, more painterly etchings and lithographs—this exhibition demonstrates the richer and more complex direction her printmaking has taken, on both formal and conceptual levels. What, then, lies ahead for Liu’s prints? She will say only that she will continue to push herself to do novel work at each new printmaking studio visit.

To provide context for her work, Hung Liu often cites a poem by Stanley Kunitz titled *The Layers*. In the poem, Kunitz muses on the challenge of remaining true to oneself throughout one’s life: “Live in the layers, not on the litter,”<sup>vi</sup> he writes. By choosing to rise above the detritus of our lives—to live in the layers—Kunitz suggests we might find a path towards self-discovery and transcendence. In her work, Hung Liu applies that same philosophy to an aesthetic context, highlighting the power of layers to create transcendent visual experiences and resonant meaning. In her paintings, we find layers everywhere: layers that obscure and reveal; images that overlay and underlie. It is no wonder we find the same emphasis in her prints, reinforcing that relationship between her work in both media. As Liu reminds us: “Printmaking is all about layers.”

Karen Kienzle



figure 11: Portrait of the artist. Photo credit: Jeff Kelley

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all of Hung Liu's quotations included in the text are from an interview by the author in Oakland, California, 16 July, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Berkson, "Hung Liu, Action Painter" in *Hung Liu: Chinese Types*. (San Francisco, Rena Bransten Gallery, 1998), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Hung Liu, Lecture at San Jose State University, 9 March, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Chinese chops are hand engraved "signatures" that have been used from ancient times to the present. Traditionally, Chinese artists and calligraphers "signed" their works with chop stamps in red ink.

<sup>6</sup> Footbinding was popularized in the Sung Dynasty (960-1279) for courtesans and upper class women as a symbol of social class. A practice justified for aesthetic reasons, it ultimately left women crippled for life. Nevertheless, the bound foot was a potent erotic symbol. For an excellent discussion of the practice of footbinding and its relationship to Hung Liu's work, see Allison Arieff's article "Cultural Collisions: Identity and History in the Work of Hung Liu," in *Woman's Art Journal* 17 (Spring/Summer 1996), 35-40.

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the Taoist symbol yin and yang is gendered, with the yin representing the negative or feminine force while the yang represents the positive or masculine force.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on Hung Liu's relationship to photography, see Sandy Harthorn's essay "Lens of Remembrance" in *Hung Liu: Strange Fruit* (San Francisco: Rena Bransten Gallery, 2002), 4-6.

<sup>9</sup> Hung Liu, quoted in Roslyn Bernstein, "Scholar-Artist: Hung Liu" in *Hung Liu: The Year of the Dog*. (New York, Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, 1994), VI-IX.

<sup>10</sup> Only two of the lithographs (*Girl with Bucket* and *Boy with Bowl*) were editioned. The third lithograph, *Boy with Pottery*, was sold as a special collector's edition.

<sup>11</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all of Pam Paulson's quotations included in the text are from a telephone interview by the author, 9 July, 2002.

<sup>12</sup> Spit bite is a technique of intaglio printing in which a strong acid is placed directly on the grounded etching plate instead of placing it in an acid bath. The term spit bite has its origins in the traditional practice of putting saliva on the plate to mix with the acid.

<sup>13</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all of Bud Shark's quotations included in the text are from a telephone interview by the author, 16 July, 2002.

<sup>14</sup> See Roslyn Bernstein, "Scholar-Artist: Hung Liu" in *Hung Liu: The Year of the Dog*. (New York, Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, 1994), VI-IX.

<sup>15</sup> Stanley Kunitz, "The Layers," in *Passing Through: The Later Poems, New and Selected*. (New York, W. W. Norton, 1995).

## HUNG LIU PRINTING CHRONOLOGY

- 2001 Shark's Ink, Lyons, Colorado
- 2000 Tamarind Institute, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico  
Shark's Ink, Lyons, Colorado
- 1999 Paulson Press, Berkeley, California
- 1999 Tamarind Institute, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico
- 1998 Anderson Ranch Art Center, Snowmass Village, Colorado
- 1997 Paulson Press, Berkeley, California
- 1997 Anderson Ranch Art Center, Snowmass Village, Colorado
- 1994 Island Press, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri
- 1994 Pyramid Atlantic, Riverdale, Maryland
- 1993 Pyramid Atlantic, Riverdale, Maryland
- 1992 Island Press, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri
- 1990 Santa Reparata, Florence, Italy

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